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ABSTRACT

A study examined student writing portfolios to determine improvement of student writing due to instructional changes under the guidelines and standards established for the Kentucky Writing Program. A random sample of 1991-92 and 1994-95 fourth-grade portfolios were analyzed, 10% from each of the 8 elementary schools in the Muhlenberg County school district. To assess the writing at four performance levels (novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished), the Kentucky Holistic Scoring Guide uses six criteria: (1) purpose and audience; (2) idea development and support; (3) organization; (4) sentences; (5) language; and (6) correctness. A survey of teachers and district personnel provided additional input regarding instructional changes responsible for these improvements. Results indicated significant gains in students' writing skills and the instruction they are receiving in their classrooms. The greatest improvement was reduction of the number of novice scores from 74.7% in 1991-92 to 10.7% in 1994-95. Over the same 4-year period, the apprentice scores increased from 22.65% to 64.69% and the proficient scores from 2.65% to 23.92%. Findings suggest marked improvement in focused purpose and audience awareness, and enhancement of idea development and organization, with the most noted improvement in sentences, language, and correctness. Overall, student writing became more expressive and imaginative. (CR)

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ONE DISTRICT'S APPROACH TO IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING:

A Study of Fourth Grade 1991-92 and 1994-95 Kentucky Writing Portfolios

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At the heart of all learning is reflective thinking. In order to determine realities and improvements, set goals, and gain confidence, we must constantly re-examine situations. After four years of compiling portfolios of student work and gathering documentation of student writing progress, educators in Kentucky have a mountain of evidence for consideration. In any school, student writing collections paint vivid pictures of improved instruction.

As Kentucky Writing Program consultants, we have had the opportunity to analyze this classroom instruction, note progress, and study student writing portfolios. Our role, working directly with local educators, has accorded us a unique perspective on the work of schools and districts in their efforts to establish strong developmental writing programs. Achievements in students' communications abilities are the direct result of more focused professional development opportunities. Districts have adjusted policy, instructional processes, curriculum, and professional development opportunities. In an effort to determine the impact of these factors on improved student performance, we studied one large Western Kentucky district, Muhlenberg County, whose scores reflected significant improvement.

To provide information about this improved student writing, we analyzed a random sample of 1991-92 and 1994-95 fourth grade portfolios, 10% from each of the 8 elementaries in the district. A survey of teachers and district personnel provided additional input regarding instructional changes responsible for these improvements. Perhaps other schools and districts will wish to use this information to further enhance their students' writing instruction.

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THE CREATION OF THE KENTUCKY WRITING PORTFOLIO

In 1990, the Kentucky Education Reform Act became law. The state legislature directed the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to create a school accountability system ensuring all students the opportunity to a quality education. The KDE, with the direct involvement of Kentucky educators from all grade level and subject area groups, developed the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). This evaluation includes performance items on a general test administered each spring and holistically scored portfolios of student writing. The data generated is to be used by schools and districts to improve instructional programs.

Early in this process the Kentucky Writing Advisory Committee established guidelines and set standards for the Kentucky Writing Portfolio. Goals for writing portfolio assessment are

- to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to become independent thinkers and writers
- to promote each student's ability to communicate to a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes
- to document student performance on multiple tasks over time
- to integrate performance assessment with classroom instruction
- to provide information upon which to base ongoing development of curriculum that is responsive to student needs

Before the Kentucky Education Reform Act, students in most districts were not consistently provided with quality learning experiences necessary for effective communication skills. In many cases, student writing experiences focused only on academic writing. The most critical writing instruction needs included writing for authentic purposes and audiences, in forms with real-world contexts. Students and teachers also needed to see that writing has application across content areas.

To address these needs and improve writing instruction statewide, the writing portfolio table of contents requires that students at the three accountability grade levels include pieces of expressive/reflective, imaginative, and transactive writing.

To assess this writing at four performance levels (Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, and Distinguished), the Kentucky Holistic Scoring Guide uses six criteria: Purpose and Audience, Idea Development and Support, Organization, Sentences, Language, and Correctness.

MUHLENBERG COUNTY GRADE FOUR WRITING PORTFOLIOS

Muhlenberg County	N	A	P	D
1991-92 Portfolios	74.70	22.65	2.65	0.00
1994-95 Portfolios	10.71	64.69	23.92	0.68

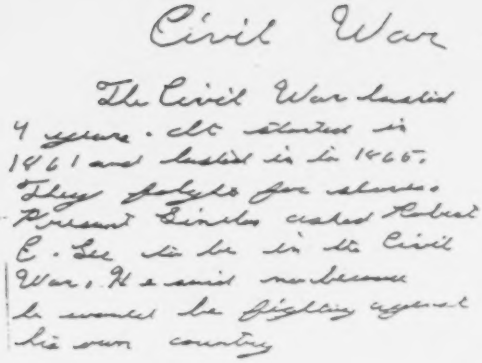
Fourth grade writing portfolios from Muhlenberg County show significant gains in students' writing skills and the instruction they are receiving in their classrooms. Though the long-term goal for writing in Kentucky is Proficient, in 1991-92 most writing portfolios statewide were at the Novice performance level. The chart above indicates a similar trend in Muhlenberg County's first year portfolios. Examination of the chart also reflects a continuing pattern of growth over the subsequent four years. The greatest improvement is the reduction of the number of novice scores from 74.70% in 1991-92 to 10.70% in 1994-95. Over the same four-year period, the apprentice scores increased from 22.65% to 64.69% and the proficient scores from 2.65% to 23.92%. Our study analyzed the events and instructional practices that brought about this continued pattern of growth. The writing samples referred to in this article were selected from these 1991-92 and 1994-95 portfolios and are representative of student writing throughout the district.

CRITERIA-BASED GROWTH INDICATORS

Purpose and Audience

Marked improvement in focused **purpose** and **audience** awareness was evident in the expressive/reflective and imaginative writing. Students

- understood importance of having the reader experience feelings, thoughts, emotions, and understandings intended by the writer.
- considered readers before beginning to write.
- attempted to write for a specific purpose and to make the audience connection rather than addressing a very broad, general topic.



Civil War

The Civil War lasted 4 years. It started in 1861 and lasted in 1865. They fought for slaves. President Lincoln asked Robert E. Lee to be in the Civil War. He said no because he would be fighting against his own country

(1991-92 Content Area Writing)

" Rise and shine," my grandmother said as I was sleepily dragging myself into the kitchen to have breakfast. " Guess who's here?" grandma said. " Let me guess....a devil's leprechaun!" I said. " No,it's Chris. Chris was one of my friends who lived just down the road. He ask me if I wanted to go down his house to ride bikes. "It might be fun," I said to grandma. Can I go after I eat? "Maybe," she said which I knew meant yes! After I ate, Chris and I went to his house.

As soon as we got there Chris had to leave, but he told me I could ride his bike. So I got on Chris's bike and rode down the very hilly sidewalk. As I was going down the steepest part of the hill the chain came off the bike and I was really speeding up. In no time at all I had lost control of the bike and I was trying to grab anything in my path. I thought I could reach. I had no luck. So I began to weep. I knew I would have to jump off.

(Excerpt from 1994-95 Personal Narrative)

Idea Development and Support

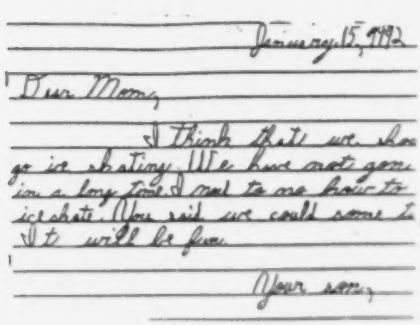
Due to the connected nature of the scoring criteria, the improvements noted in purpose and audience did enhance **idea development** somewhat. Students

- included more descriptive details
- produced more complete paragraphs
- used more vivid descriptions

This area, however, remained problematic for the majority of students. Often the details were ancillary to the purpose and only provided more "what" about the "what."

Organization

The **organization** of information into paragraphs was more logical and at times more coherent.



January 15, 1992

Dear Mom,

I think that we should go ice skating. We have not gone in a long time and to me have to ice skate. You said we could some it will be fun.

Your son,

(1991-92 Persuasive Letter)

Dear Mom and Dad,

Remember when we went to Canada to Uncle Sam's house? I spent most of the time on his computer. I used his traveling west disk. I remember you could name the people on the wagon. I named them your names. Dad got snake bit and mom got some weird diease. I sunk the wagon a few times. Most of the time we were going along pretty smooth. We ran into a few heard of buffalo. It was almost like you were really there. If you would consider getting me a computer like his, I might stay out of your hair.

I understand you might be worried about where we are going to put it. I could put some of my toys in my closet

(Excerpt from 1994-95 Persuasive Letter)

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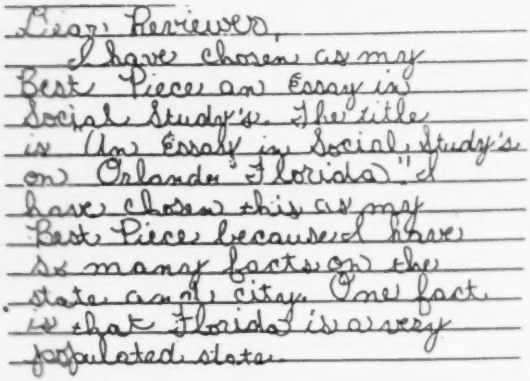
Sentences, Language, and Correctness

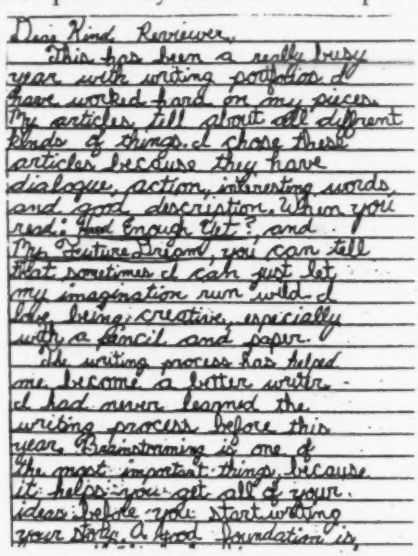
The criteria on the holistic scoring guide which displayed the most noted improvement in 1994-95 portfolios were those on the lower half of the listed criteria: **sentences**, **language**, and **correctness**. Perhaps one reason for this improvement can be traced to past instructional practice. Sentences, language, and correctness are most closely related to the teaching of specific writing skills. Since most teachers had a better understanding of the direction this instruction should take, we were not surprised to find improvement here. These criteria also are the easiest to improve because they involve "doing," rather than "thinking." Students

- chose nouns and verbs specifically related to the purpose and addressing a specific audience.
- varied their sentences
- moved from incorrect or ineffective N/V structured sentence to more compound and complex development.

Even though sentences were stronger, for the most part they remained simplistic and/or awkward.


Dear Reviewer,
I have chosen as my Best Piece an Essay is Social Study's. The title is "An Essay in Social Study's on Orlando Florida". I have chosen this as my Best Piece because I have so many facts on the state and its city. One fact is that Florida is a very populated state.

(!991-92 Letter to Reviewer)


Dear Kind Reviewer,
This has been a really busy year with writing portfolios. I have worked hard on my pieces. My articles tell about all different kinds of things. I chose these articles because they have dialogue, action, interesting words, and good description. When you read it, find enough this? and My Future Friend, you can tell that sometimes I can just let my imagination run wild. I like being creative, especially with a pencil and paper.
The writing process has helped me become a better writer. I had never learned the writing process before this year. Brainstorming is one of the most important things because it helps you get all of your ideas before you start writing your story. A good foundation is,

(Excerpt from 1994-95 Letter to Reviewer)

INSTRUCTION-BASED GROWTH INDICATORS

Due to the emphasis in Muhlenberg County elementary schools on writing instruction, most pieces demonstrated a clearer understanding of quality writing and the importance of prewriting. In addition, few pieces appeared to be first-draft

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efforts; editing problems were almost nonexistent. When surveyed, teachers cited an improvement in their students' abilities to revise. Students also expressed in their Letters to the Reviewer process strategies which had been helpful to them.

Expressive

- Narratives were livelier and more engaging.
- Stronger narratives contained resolutions or lessons learned for reflection.
- Few narratives were merely a recounting of events in the writer's life.
- Letters to the Reviewer were more reflective and introspective.
- Ideas were supported by more carefully chosen details and effective language.
- Conclusions provided a sense of completion rather than just an ending.

Imaginative

- Pieces showed planning on the part of the writer.
- Organization was clearer and focus was maintained throughout.
- Action stories came to life; they were not just the summary of a story line.
- Short stories appeared to be modeled after stories students had read and analyzed for their writing components.
- Many short stories presented and solved a problem and contained related character development.
- Conclusions provided a sense of completion rather than just an ending.

Transactive

Transactive pieces were the weakest pieces overall, pointing out a need for more focused instruction in this area. With the exception of some strong persuasive letters, most of the pieces were merely reports that reflected knowledge the student had gained from another source to be shared with the teacher (writing to demonstrate learning).

DISTRICT-WIDE COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

The 1994-95 portfolios evidence the impact of professional development, policy, instructional process, and curricular changes. Educators in the district and others who examine this student writing can see the achievements. Evaluation of 1991-92

student writing scores led district administrators to channel resources and planning toward improving student writing skills. Jennifer Whitehead, Supervisor of Instruction for the Muhlenberg County Schools, noted, "Our success is a combination of many factors: hard work, belief and support of KERA, recognition of the need for our students to become proficient writers, and a desire for every student to become a life-long learner. From the beginning, we have had great support for change from our local school board, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. It has truly been a collaborative effort. When asked if the writing portfolio experience has been worth it, my answer is a resounding 'YES.' Teachers have become better teachers because of the process and students have become better writers; but more importantly, students have become better **thinkers**."

Those most directly involved in this effort credit a number of factors for the student growth.

- The district received a Kentucky Writing Program Innovative Grant which prompted a comprehensive look at the current writing program.
- A Writing Resource Teacher was employed to work with the eight elementary schools in the district.
- The Writing Resource Teacher prepared a writing notebook for each elementary teacher in the district which contains information they need for quality writing instruction. She periodically updated this resource.
- Kentucky Writing Program Portfolio Analysis Grant funds were used to examine 1992-93 portfolios for instructional implications. The information gained led to the following changes in policy and practice:
    - An additional portfolio analysis session was conducted to involve all fourth grade teachers in the district.
    - A writing committee of teachers from the district was formed.
    - A district writing policy for grades P-12 was developed requiring progress folders be maintained at all grades.
    - Fourth grade *Kentucky Writing Teacher's Portfolio Handbooks* were provided for every teacher in the county, P-4, including librarians and other support staff.

An overview of portfolio scoring was conducted for all primary teachers.

Scoring training for fourth grade teachers was conducted on a county-wide basis, instead of in individual schools, and double-blind scoring sessions were established using this same format.

KET videos on writing were made available for teachers.

- A more concentrated collaborative effort was established between classroom teachers and their counterparts in Title I and Special Education.
- Cluster leaders were compensated for the extra time and effort required to effectively perform these duties.
- A teacher resource center including professional publications and supplies for publishing student work was established in the Board of Education office.
- Several schools arranged their schedules to provide a 1/2 day planning time each month for teachers.
- Thirteen teachers from the district have become Writing Fellows through the Western Kentucky University Writing Project.
- Several Western Kentucky Writing Project Outreach workshops have been offered to teachers in the district.
- Parents are encouraged to review student work at open houses and to spend time conferencing with their children.

In addition to the above initiatives, teachers and schools selected individual professional development opportunities to strengthen their understanding and implementation of writing in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS

Many of the writing skills strengths and needs of Muhlenberg County students were revealed in this study. With these results, the district is better prepared to make effective instructional changes for the future. Even administrators recognize this as a long-term commitment that must involve entire faculties at all schools within the district. Principal Allen J. Miller, Bremen Elementary School, affirmed, "Our

students must be able to communicate in the world in which they live. Anything that helps them learn to communicate is worth our efforts."

To ensure for each child an internationally superior education and a love for learning, all school districts need to take a comprehensive look at their current writing program. Where success exists, *"What can you do to make certain this level of achievement continues from year to year?"* In those districts where success is slow to occur, *"What can you do to elevate your current level of performance?"* To influence student life-long learning, we educators must reflect and re-examine. We must continue to learn. We must apply our own learning to theirs.

Joseph Wells, principal of Lake Malone Elementary, where scores have shown significant gains from 1991, recognizes the importance of not becoming complacent about the school's attainments. " We are very excited about our success but understand that we still can make improvements." Muhlenberg County teachers and administrators recognize that building a strong developmental program takes time and resources. To be successful, the program must constantly be reviewed and modified. By returning to student writing each year, educators are able to determine what needs require attention.